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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 000164

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SUBJECT: JAPAN-ROK STRATEGIC DIALOGUE: TOKYO OPTIMISTIC
ABOUT NEW ROH ADMINISTRATION

REF: TOKYO 00105

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer. Reasons 1.4 (B) (D)

11. (C) Summary. During the recent Japan-ROK Strategic Dialogue, former VFM Shotaro Yachi told his South Korean counterpart that PM Yasuo Fukuda places great importance on balancing the strength of the United States-Japan alliance with Japan's Asian diplomacy, MOFA contacts told Embassy Tokyo on January 18. Tokyo also proposed holding a new United States-Japan-ROK trilateral dialogue at the deputy minister level to discuss regional issues. ROK delegates said President-elect Lee Myung-bak "would put more emphasis on the nuclear issue, and made clear that assistance to the DPRK must be clearly linked to resolving the nuclear issue." Seoul officials believe the Six-Party Talks (6PT) achieved progress in 2007 and urged 6PT members to maintain "the achievements and avoid any setbacks." End Summary.

12. (C) On January 18, MOFA Northeast Asia Division Deputy Director Shigetoshi Nagao briefed Embassy political officer on the Fifth Japan-ROK Strategic Dialogue, which took place on January 8 in Seoul. According to Nagao, former VFM Shotaro Yachi held a two-and-one-half hour meeting with counterpart Vice Minister Cho Jung-pyo, paid a courtesy call on FM Song Min-soon, and met the head of President-elect Lee Myung-bak's transition team, Lee Kyung-sook, before attending a dinner hosted by VFM Cho. Nagao noted that the one-day stopover constituted Yachi's last official visit as Vice-Minister (Note: Yachi retired on January 17, and was replaced by Mitoji Yabunaka.)

13. (C) Nagao said the meeting, which Japan and the ROK agreed to hold some time ago, coincided with recent positive developments as the two countries sought to exchange views and revitalize their bilateral ties (Ref A). The two main topics on the agenda were: 1) revitalizing the bilateral relationship under the new ROK presidential administration, and 2) North Korea, which Nagao described as the "most important" issue.

Bilateral Issues

14. (C) According to Nagao, VM Yachi told the South Koreans that PM Yasuo Fukuda places great importance on "the synergy between the strength of the United States-Japan alliance and Asian diplomacy." Cho responded that President-elect Lee plans to prioritize the United States-ROK alliance while at the same time strengthening Japan-South Korea ties. MOFA representatives at the dialogue concluded that both leaders hold similar policy views on the need to improve Tokyo-Seoul relations, Nagao said. As a result, Japanese officials left with the "expectation and hope that the bilateral relationship would be fundamentally improved" under President-elect Lee's leadership.

Trilateral Meeting

15. (C) Yachi "floated the idea" of launching a United States-Japan-ROK trilateral dialogue, Nagao stated. Nagao pointed out that while the three sides had previously met under The Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), the TCOG framework had only focused on the North Korea nuclear issue. The proposed new structure, Nagao continued, would address regional issues at the deputy minister level, and the participants would be Japan's newly appointed DFM for Political Affairs Kenichiro Sasae (former Director-General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs and lead Six-Party Talks negotiator), ROK DFM Shim, and U/S Burns. In response, the ROK delegation promised to "think about the matter positively and to consult with President-elect Lee."

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North Korea

16. (C) Japanese officials, Nagao stated, believe that South Korea's thinking on North Korea is "changing," and that "Seoul's policy is approaching Japan's policy." The ROK side reportedly told Yachi that "President-elect Lee would put more emphasis on the nuclear issue, and made clear that assistance to the DPRK must be clearly linked to resolving the nuclear issue," Nagao reported. VFM Cho expressed regret that the North Koreans did not submit a nuclear declaration by December 31. ROK interlocutors stressed, however, the importance of the declaration's content over timing, according to Nagao. Seoul officials believe that the Six-Party Talks achieved a great deal of progress in 2007, including the February and October agreements. The South Koreans, Nagao maintained, told Yachi that it would be "important to have a ratchet wheel on the Six-Party process," i.e., "to keep the achievements and avoid any setbacks."

SCHIEFFER